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U.S. Children's Bureau

Sunlight for babies

[Washington]

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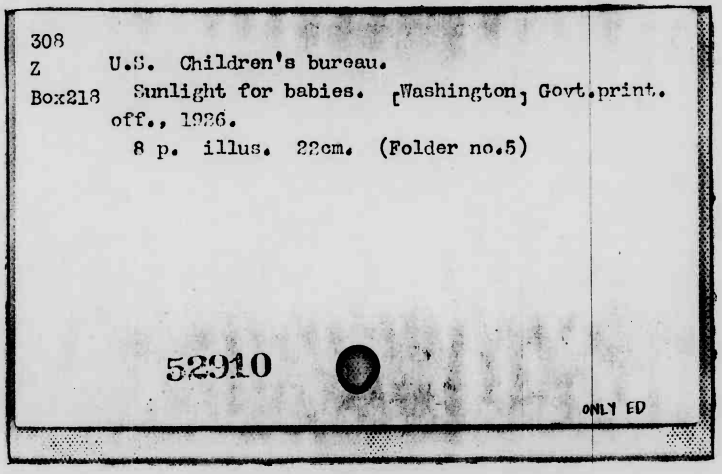

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SUNLIGHT FOR BABIES

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SUNLIGHT AND GROWTH

Sunlight is a most important factor in the life of a growing child, especially a baby. Although this has been known in a general way for a long time, it has not been given sufficient attention until recent years, during which knowledge of the effect of sunlight on the growth of children has become more specific.

Normal growth of bone is dependent not only on the food that the child eats but also upon the direct sunlight that he receives, for the sunlight provides the body with the power to utilize the food. If a baby is constantly deprived of direct sunlight his bones will not develop normally, his muscles will be flabby, and his skin will be pale. He will probably have rickets.

RICKETS CAUSED BY LACK OF SUNLIGHT

Rickets is a disease of growth, affecting the whole body, but most strikingly the bones. In hot climates, where children are outdoors in the sun throughout the year, rickets is little known; in temperate climates, where children are indoors a large part of the year, rickets is prevalent. Since rickets is a disease resulting primarily from lack of sunlight it can be prevented or cured by sunlight.

To ward off rickets preventive measures must be begun very early in an infant's life, for rickets makes its appearance in very young infants. These preventive measures are the giving of sun baths and the administering of cod-liver oil, the so-called "bottled sunshine."

PREVENT RICKETS

U.S. Dept. of Agriculture

WINDOW GLASS BARS ULTRA-VIOLET RAYS

When the sun's rays are analyzed by a physicist it is found that some of them produce light that when passed through a prism divides into the well-known spectrum of colors—red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet. Beyond each end of this visible spectrum are invisible rays, at one end the infra-red rays that produce heat, and at the other end the beneficial ultra-violet rays that have a powerful effect on living matter—destroying bacteria and healing tuberculosis and rickets.

When sunlight passes through window glass the visible rays and the heat rays pass through, but the ultra-violet rays do not. In the same way heat rays may penetrate clothing but ultra-violet rays do not.

SPRING AND SUMMER SUN MOST BENEFICIAL

The ultra-violet light coming from the sun to the earth varies in its intensity with the seasons. This variation probably depends on the distance the rays have traveled through the atmosphere to reach the earth. The greater the distance the rays travel the less intense is the ultra-violet light that reaches the earth.

To reach the North Temperate Zone the rays must travel a much greater distance in winter when the sun is in the south than in summer when it is in the north. When the sun's rays reach the earth at nearly a right angle to the earth's surface, in May, June, and July, the ultra-violet content of the sunlight is at its height, and when the rays are oblique, in the winter months, it is lowest.

GIVE SUN BATHS ALL THE YEAR ROUND

SUNLIGHT GOOD FOR BABY

It has long been a tradition that babies are delicate and must be carefully protected from direct sunlight. When a baby was put outdoors he was bundled up in many clothes and wraps, and the hood of the baby carriage was pulled up to keep out every ray of sunlight. The carriage might be placed in the sun, but the ultra-violet rays could not penetrate the hood and the clothes to reach the baby.

It has also been believed that a baby's eyes are weak and sensitive to light. The sun does not cause inflammation, however, when the baby's eyes are closed or when his head is turned so that the eyes are not in the direct line of the rays.

Traditions such as these, handed down from generation to generation, are founded more on hearsay than on fact.

DIRECT RAYS ESSENTIAL

The beneficial effect of sunlight is not obtained unless the rays reach the skin directly. The interposition of clothing or window glass keeps out the ultra-violet rays. It is only when the skin begins to be tanned that any benefit may be expected.

Sun baths in the direct sunlight are the simplest method of giving the baby enough ultra-violet light. An older child, who has learned to walk, naturally seeks the sunny part of the playground, but a baby is dependent on others to put him in the sun.

PUT THE BABY IN THE SUN

GIVE SUN BATHS EARLY

In the North Temperate Zone it is usually possible for normal babies to begin to have outdoor sun baths by the middle of March or the first of April, provided that the place selected for the sun bath is protected from the wind.

Sun baths should be begun when the baby is about 3 or 4 weeks old. A baby born in the spring or summer, therefore, can have outdoor sun baths earlier than a fall or winter baby. The exact date when sun baths may be begun varies with the latitude and the weather.

BEGINNING THE SUN BATH

On the first sunny day in early spring the baby may be put in the direct sunlight with the hood of the carriage and the baby's cap pushed well back so that the sun will shine directly on his cheeks. He should be turned first on one side and then on the other so that both cheeks will be exposed to the sun and yet the eyes will be kept away from the direct rays. On this first day the baby's hands should be exposed to the direct sun for a few minutes. Care must be taken not to burn the skin.

A slight reddening of the skin each day will gradually bring about pigmentation or tanning. Unless the baby is accustomed to the sunlight through exposure at an open window the first outdoor sun bath should be for 10 or 15 minutes only. Each day thereafter the exposure to the sun should be increased by 3 to 5 minutes.

Every few days the amount of body surface exposed should be increased, at first slowly, but as the days grow warmer, more rapidly.

GET THE BABY USED TO SUNLIGHT

BABY SHOULD HAVE A COAT OF TAN

After the face and hands are used to the sun the arms may be bared, at first one at a time, later both together. They should be bared for only a few minutes at first, and the time increased daily. Soon the legs also may be bared, at first one at a time, and later both together. Gradually the baby gets used to the sun, and by the middle of May or the first of June sun baths may be given the whole body. When the face, arms, and legs are tanned the shirt should be taken off for a short time daily, and finally the band and diaper. The sun baths may be lengthened until the baby lies in the sun an hour in the morning and an hour in the afternoon. In July and August sun baths should be given before 11 a. m. and after 3 p. m. On very hot days the baby should not be given sun baths between these hours. If he is outdoors at that time his head should be protected. The face and hands should be well tanned by the middle of April, the arms and legs by the middle of May, and the whole body in June. A good tan is evidence that the ultra-violet rays are being effective.

WINTER BABIES NEED SUNLIGHT

In cold parts of the temperate zones extensive outdoor sun baths can not be given between the middle of November and the middle of March. However, on bright winter days the baby can be put outdoors to get whatever sunlight there is. Many mothers think that in cold weather a baby may not be put outdoors, not realizing that in the sun the thermometer may register 40 or 50 degrees more than in the shade. If the baby is protected from wind the sun will keep him warm.

GIVE SUN BATHS IN WINTER

INDOOR SUN BATHS AT OPEN WINDOW

A sun bath can be given indoors at a window opened at top or bottom, the baby being placed in the patch of sunlight coming through the open space. It is thus possible to produce tanning. If the room is heated the baby need not be wrapped up warmly. It may not be possible to expose the whole body to the sun; but the face, hands, and legs can be exposed daily for increasing periods. The periods of exposure should be longer than the summer outdoor periods, and they should be between 10 a. m. and 1 p. m., when the rays are most intense.

Winter and fall babies need long sun baths, as they are more likely to develop severe rickets than those born in the spring and summer. If a baby is used to indoor sun baths he can be started on outdoor ones by the first of March, or even earlier, depending on the climate and the weather.

COD-LIVER OIL IS "BOTTLED SUNSHINE"

In the temperate zones sunlight must be supplemented with cod-liver oil, especially in fall and winter. X-ray studies have shown that either sunlight or cod-liver oil, or better, both together would cure rickets or prevent it.

Rickets affects about 90 per cent of the babies in the North Temperate Zone. Even though a baby is born in the spring and receives sun baths throughout his first summer he should also be given cod-liver oil. A winter baby can not get enough outdoor sunshine, so he especially needs cod-liver oil. It should be given to every baby throughout the first two years of life, beginning at 2 weeks of age, whether he is breast fed or artificially fed.

DAILY AMOUNTS OF COD-LIVER OIL

2 to 6 weeks, ½ teaspoonful twice a day.
6 weeks to 3 months, 1 teaspoonful twice a day.
3 to 4 months, 1½ teaspoonfuls twice a day.
4 months to 2 years, 1½ to 2 teaspoonfuls twice a day.

GIVE SUN BATH AND COD-LIVER OIL DAILY

HOW TO GIVE COD-LIVER OIL TO BABY

With the baby on your lap, pour the cod-liver oil into a spoon held in your right hand. With your left hand open the baby's mouth by pressing his cheeks together between your thumb and fingers. Pour the oil little by little into his mouth. If his mouth is not held open until the oil is entirely swallowed he will spit out what is left in his mouth. It is rare for a baby actually to vomit oil. Cod-liver oil will not upset a baby's digestion. Older babies may be given orange juice with the cod-liver oil, or after it. It is best however to teach them to take it directly, unmixed with anything else.

SUN BATHS FOR OLDER CHILDREN

Though sun baths are of primary importance for the baby they are also of great value for the "runabout" and the preschool child. Sun bathing is more important for the child than sea bathing, and it is accessible everywhere in spring and summer. Clothing for sun baths should be low in the neck, short in the legs, and without sleeves. An ordinary bathing suit or bathing trunks, a sleeveless slip, or a set of cotton underwear may be worn.

Sun baths may be given in the fields, in a city back yard, on a roof, or on a porch, as well as on a beach. Care must be taken not to let the child's skin become sunburned severely. The best time for sun baths is the morning.

Tanning is the goal for which to strive, and the process must be gradual. The exposure should begin with the face and arms and increase slowly in duration and in the extent of body surface exposed, until the whole body is exposed for two hours a day.

SUNLIGHT AND COD-LIVER OIL PREVENT RICKETS

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